

**Consultancy Report**  
**Prepared for the**  
**Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History**  
**Regarding its Archival/Manuscript Division**  
**Prepared by**  
**Michael Smith, Director, and Louis Jones, CA**  
**of the**  
**Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University**

**October 20, 2008**

In August of 2008, we, Michael Smith and Louis Jones, of the Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, conducted an assessment of the Archives and Manuscript Division of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History following an initial assessment in November 2007. Subsequently, we discussed our findings with Bob Smith and Dr. Linda Gillum of the MAAH. The following is our written report.

We are extremely pleased with the progress archivist Alexis Braun Marks and her staff have made in transforming the Archives and Manuscript Division of the Museum (hereafter cited as Archives) and are impressed with the support the Archives has received from Mr. Smith and Dr. Gillum. To be sure, we are impressed with the substantial progress made in such a short period: the Archives was in a state of neglect and disarray when we first conducted a survey of the Archives. We are pleased to report that Alexis Braun Marks and her staff now have a good measure of control over the collections; have processed a good deal of the collection, especially the photographs and have cleaned and organized the collection storage areas and workrooms. Gillum, Smith, Marks and their colleagues are to be commended for their efforts.

Great progress has been made, but there remains work to be done. In this respect, we recommend that the Archives continue with its plans to process collections as planned and recommend the following specific measures:

- We strongly urge the Archives to establish a mission statement and collecting policy. A mission statement will delineate the role of the Archives, both within the Museum and within the greater Detroit and Michigan Communities. A collecting policy will then allow the Archives staff to implement the mission statement and develop plans for the pursuit of new manuscript, audiovisual, books, and other collections for the Archives. A mission statement and a collection policy are standard and recommended policies for all archival programs. They provide focus for collecting initiatives, as well as a rational for what not to collect. Moreover, such policies will also “stake-out” territory for the Archives within the larger arena of Michigan and metropolitan Detroit where already established archival programs have been collecting for many years, and work toward good relations with established archival programs in the state.

- In respect to the above recommendation, we urge the Museum to consider including “Detroit African American Family Life” and “African American Culture and Arts” in the mission and collecting statement. This is a subject area for which there are few collections in established archival programs in Michigan. We urge the Museum to consider these areas as possible foci for the Archives’ mission statement and collecting policy.
- We recommend that the Archives develop a range of other policies for daily operations, reference services, and patron access to the collections, which include but are not limited to such issues as the hours and/or days of operation; photocopying and scanning policies, and fees for the same; use of digital cameras; preservation of materials (rules for use of materials, food/drinks in the reading room, etc.); access to materials; research and photocopy fees; interlibrary loan; use of computers; disruptive or unruly behavior; and other like issues. With such policies, the Archives will need to develop a host of forms, including but not limited to registration forms, call slips, photocopying and/or digital copying request forms, restricted use forms, audio visual request forms, rules for use of material, etc. To this end, the Archives should consider making some or all of these forms and policies available online and maintaining them electronically. We understand that the Archives is already developing operational policies and commend this effort.
- The Archives should refrain from engaging in an aggressive collecting policy until it has gained more control over its collections and established a mission statement and collection policy, as mentioned above.
- The Archives should continue processing collections. We recommend that processing priorities be devoted to the Horace Sheffield Collection, Coleman Young Collection and the museum’s own organizational records. They are important, and once processed, the collections of these prominent Detroiters will attract researchers, and the Museum’s collection will be useful for internal operations.
- We urge that the Archives strengthen its collections and ties to the community by pursuing an oral history project centered on families, arguably the most important institution in any community. To this end, the Archives should consider working through religious institutions (e.g., churches and mosques) as a means of identifying these families. An ongoing oral history project with this focus, should seek out families living in the different sections of the city, ensure that the families sought range in size, socio-economic makeup and reflect the diversity of this institution as it exists in Detroit.
- Building partnerships with other area cultural institutions via projects or activities will benefit the Museum. Since the Detroit Public Library’s Burton Historical Collection already works with the Detroit genealogical community, the Archives may want to consider pursuing collaboration with that institution as regards an oral history project centered on families. Since the University of Michigan’s Bentley Historical Collections collects the records of Detroit-area churches, the extent to which an oral history -- or any other -- project involves churches, the Archives should consider seeking a collaboration with that institution. Since Wayne State University’s Walter P. Reuther Library collects

labor records and co-sponsors the Detroit African American History Project, there may be opportunities for collaborations on those fronts, especially given that both the Archives and the Reuther maintain material regarding the prominent African-American political and labor leaders Coleman Young and Horace Sheffield. In these collaborations, each institution will build on each other's strengths. Most importantly, funding agencies are often eager to fund collaborations between institutions.

In conclusion, we are pleased to assist the Museum on the assessment of its Archives with this project. We are also impressed with the progress made thus far and the vision for the future. The Reuther Library looks forward to working with the Archives and Museum to develop collaborative projects that will benefit both institutions and our patrons.

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Michael Smith  
Director  
Walter P. Reuther Library

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Louis Jones, CA  
Archivist  
Walter P. Reuther Library